



Richard Udoff (left), VFW state commander, listens to George E. Creighton of the VFW's national legislative committee before a news conference on a bill to aid disabled veterans in getting benefits. JED KIRSCHBAUM [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

Bill would help disabled veterans

BY NICOLE FULLER
[SUN REPORTER]

Two of his vertebrae cracked and his knees aching from injuries sustained during a training exercise, Army veteran Richard Vandervlis applied to the Social Security Administration for benefits.

Vandervlis, 48, of Baltimore Highlands, had been certified 100 percent disabled by the Department of Veterans Affairs. But it was more than two years before the Social Security Administration came to the same conclusion.

"The stress was unreal," Vandervlis said yesterday.

Rep. John Sarbanes, whose staff worked on behalf of Vandervlis' successful claim, introduced legislation in Congress last week that would help other disabled veterans avoid the often long and arduous road that many face when applying for federal benefits.

The Benefit Rating Acceleration for Veteran Entitlement Act, or the BRAVE Act, would streamline the

process for veterans applying for federal aid by granting those deemed "100 percent disabled" by Veterans Affairs the same recognition from the Social Security Administration. Currently, disabled veterans must apply separately to Social Security for benefits.

"It is like double duty when they already received the 100 percent disabled rating," Sarbanes said yesterday at a news conference outside the Fallon Federal Building in downtown Baltimore. "They can't work. They can't hold a job. ... We've got to support our troops beyond the battlefield." Sarbanes said the bill has 36 co-sponsors and support from Republicans and Democrats.

"We don't comment on pending legislation or bills that are introduced," said Mark Hinkle, a spokesman for the Social Security Administration. "We can tell you, we actually have had a process in effect for disabled or injured military members since 2001. Once they've been identified [as veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and

Iraq], we expedite the process."

Hinkle said a typical claim takes about 90 days to process. A veteran's applicant would be processed more quickly.

Among the veterans lending their support to the bill yesterday was George E. Creighton, a member of the national legislative committee for the Bowie branch of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

"This is wonderful," Creighton said. "It's absolutely necessary. My job right now is to get [Reps. Wayne T.] Gilchrest, [Albert R.] Wynn, [Steny H.] Hoyer and [Roscoe G.] Bartlett to be co-sponsors for this legislation."

Richard Beckwell of the American Legion Riders Motorcycle Association also is hoping for passage.

"It's way overdue," Beckwell said. "It's something that shouldn't have had to be legislated. It should be automatic. They put themselves in harm's way to fight for this country, so why should they have to fight again?"

nicole.fuller@baltsun.com

